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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [PINR](#) [VE](#) [CU](#) [BL](#)
SUBJECT: VENEZUELA-BOLIVIA: HOW MUCH FIRE BEHIND THE SMOKE?

REF: A. LA PAZ 3013
[1](#)B. LA PAZ 3119

Classified By: Ecopol Counselor Mike Hammer for reasons 1.4 b and d.

[1](#)1. (C) Summary. A common cry among opposition circles is that Hugo Chavez is pulling Evo's strings, particularly as Morales forcefully pushes forward to adopt a new constitution that would provide for indefinite reelection. Evo for his part does nothing to hide his admiration for Chavez; on the contrary he acts like a smitten school girl when he is with Chavez and constantly touts their personal/ideological bond. But, how much influence does Chavez have? Is Venezuelan money buying loyalty within the Bolivian armed forces? Are there sizable numbers of Venezuelan troops in country? Is Venezuela smuggling arms into Bolivia? While it is difficult to separate fact from fiction, there is little doubt here that Evo listens to Chavez, and that the Venezuelan and Cuban Ambassadors here play a central advisory role. We have heard enough to indicate that Venezuela is impatient with the pace of change in Bolivia and is pushing Morales hard to consolidate his hold on power. The results of Venezuelan December 2 constitutional referendum may impact Evo's thinking on how he should proceed with a similar referendum in Bolivia. End summary

Alleged Venezuelan Coaching on Constituent Assembly
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[1](#)2. (C) While the opposition sometimes exaggerates Chavez' influence over Morales, Brazilian and Peruvian diplomats based in La Paz assert that it is becoming increasingly evident that Chavez is pushing Evo to follow Venezuela's script. These diplomats recounted a GRULAC dinner hosted by the Cuban Ambassador on November 26, attended by President Morales (who arrived with the Venezuelan Ambassador), during which Evo told the group that "there is no going back." Morales expressed displeasure with how his MAS party handled the Constituent Assembly process in Sucre but was vehement that a new constitution must go forward. To the astonishment of the Latin American diplomats present, the Venezuelan Ambassador then launched into a 30-minute ramble about the common history Bolivia and Venezuela share and how their

futures are linked.

¶3. (S) According to the Brazilian political counselor, an "extremely reliable" source had reported that the Venezuelan Ambassador was at an Evo cabinet meeting November 29 as the MAS-led Constituent Assembly was proceeding in Sucre. Apparently, when a couple of ministers expressed concern about moving forward unilaterally with the Constituent Assembly, the Venezuelan Ambassador urged that the government go ahead. Comment: While we are quite skeptical that the Venezuelan Ambassador would actually attend a cabinet meeting, ROAL sources independently place the Venezuelan at the Palace that day. Whether or not the Venezuelan Ambassador actually attended the cabinet meeting, Evo meets regularly with him and undoubtedly seeks his advice. End Comment.)

Venezuelan Military Presence in Beni Department

¶4. (C) In a discussion with Peruvian, German, Argentine and Brazilian diplomats here, all expressed concern about a known Venezuelan military presence in the northeastern Beni department (bordering Brazil). It is quite public and in fact touted that a Venezuelan engineer company is building levies around the Beni capital of Trinidad. Beni local authorities are, however, convinced that the Venezuelans are also training Bolivian military in special operations and have sizable arms caches for a possible further deployment. The German reported that without a doubt there is a Venezuelan base in San Borja, but the other diplomats were dismissive of this information and argued that the Beni authorities tend to greatly exaggerate. We cannot confirm that there is a "secret" Venezuelan base at that location and suspect that the opposition is exaggerating and/or is simply expressing concern about the Venezuelan military presence. Our Defense Attach was told by the Mayor of Trinidad on November 26 that there are 200 to 300 Venezuelans in Trinidad. The group of diplomats affirmed that the number of Venezuelans is about 300, but no one is completely certain. We understand that the Venezuelans have exclusive control over Venezuelan flights and cargo, and exercise an inordinate amount of control over the military portion of the Trinidad airport.

Beni on Venezuelan Mystery Flights:
We're Not Gonna Take It, Anymore

¶5. (S) Defense Attach also met with Trinidad Mayor Moises Shiriqui following a meeting between Beni Department Prefect Ernesto Suarez and Beni Mayors. The Mayor brought up the 0100 arrival of a Venezuela C-130 cargo plane at the Beni airport November 24, which local authorities suspected was shuttling arms. After unloading seven large wooden crates, the plane immediately departed. Authorities told the media, which were forced to leave shortly after the landing, that the boxes contained medical supplies. (Note: We have not been able to determine what is in the crates. End note.)

¶6. (C) Prefect Suarez announced publicly November 29 that Venezuelan planes would not be allowed to land at Trinidad. If provided advance landing notice from the government, local authorities plan to block the runway with vehicles in order to prevent any Venezuelan plane from landing or taking off. (Note: Official Airport hours are between 0800 and 2200. There is a history of opposition accusations the Venezuelans are shipping in arms, perhaps destined for nefarious pro-government groups. The opposition also complained about an early morning Beni stopover by Venezuelan President Hugo Chavez as an affront to Bolivian sovereignty. Ref A. End Note.)

Will Evo Turn To Comandante Chavez?

¶7. (C) The Peruvian political counselor was extremely concerned that Venezuela, at Evo's invitation, would

intervene militarily in Bolivia to back Morales should he be unable to exercise control over the opposition departments of Beni, Pando, Tarija and Santa Cruz. The Peruvian believes, and the Brazilian agreed, that the rank-and-file military will not/not use lethal force against fellow Bolivians. We too share this assessment (Ref B). The Peruvian and Brazilian both commented that funds coming in from Venezuela to the Bolivian military do not flow down from the senior ranks, and therefore, there is much resentment. The top military commanders, however, are opportunists that will follow Evo's orders out of self-interest. In fact, Generals Vargas, Bersatti and Trigo are reportedly fighting to stay in their jobs, causing further disgruntlement among those who would like to move into their positions. So, there are strong indications that the military is split and could be quite reticent to follow orders. Hence, with no Bolivian military to enforce Evo's will, Peru fears he will turn to Chavez.

Chavez Stirs the Pot

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18. (SBU) Chavez's November 27 statement that the U.S. "empire" is "promoting violence" in order to overthrow the Morales administration builds on a constant barrage of inflammatory statements indicating a willingness, or perhaps an eagerness, to send Venezuelan troops to Bolivia to bolster his erstwhile ally. Chavez's October 14 threat to turn Bolivia into Vietnam should "oligarchs" attack Morales provided the opposition with traction for long-standing complaints of Venezuelan "imperialist" designs. Morales defended the remarks in November 4 magazine article. Both leaders reiterated and expanded upon the Vietnam remarks during their November 10 addresses at the Ibero-American Conference in Chile, where Chavez warned Bolivian supporters of the United States ("pitiyanquies") that any attempt to remove Morales would be met with "a thunder of rifles and machine guns." Questions over possible Venezuelan involvement in the October 18 Bolivian military takeover of Santa Cruz's Viru Viru Airport further ignited criticism of the Bolivian-Venezuelan relationship. Venezuelan "imperialism" has stayed in the headlines since, fed by heated exchanges between opposition and government officials, an alleged attack on the Venezuelan consulate in Santa Cruz, and a scandal involving \$11 million in missing Venezuelan micro-credit loans.

Comment

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19. (C) The opposition's cries of Chavez the big bad wolf are over the top, but they are right when they express concern that Evo is getting advice from the Venezuelans and Cubans. With checks and doctors, the Venezuelan and Cuban ambassadors are doing what they can to bolster Evo and push his change program. For example, it is estimated that Evo has distributed around \$60-80 million in Venezuelan checks to municipalities since he came to office. That said, beyond the financial support and advisory role, we find little hard evidence to support the prospect of actual Venezuelan military intervention in Bolivia. The opposition will continue to point to Chavez to discredit Evo and are hoping that a victory for the "no" vote in Venezuela's referendum will give Evo pause about proceeding with his. Likewise, the opposition fears that if Chavez wins, he will embolden Evo to push ahead
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